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OF

CHILD-CARING ORGANIZATIONS

Homer Jackson

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ANNUAL REPORTS OF CHILD-CARING ORGANIZATIONS.

BY HOMER FOLKS.

“If Solomon in all his wisdom had been compelled to write reports of a charitable institution for many successive years, where monotony was the rule, and anything novel or interesting the exception, he would have given up in despair and been more than ever convinced of the truth of his saying,—there is no new thing under the sun.” This quotation from a recent report of an orphan asylum doubtless expresses very aptly the spirit in which secretaries of such organizations usually approach the task of writing the annual report. It also gives us some indication of the aim which such writers are apt to have in mind and of the probable value of the results of their efforts. A study of a considerable number of the products offered to the public as annual reports, leads us to a few reflections as to what such a yearly message should contain.

An annual report of a child-caring agency should, it seems to us, serve the following general purposes:—

I. It should be an account of stewardship of certain funds which have been contributed by public or private charity and expended by other than the donors. The givers should know whether these funds have been expended and whether they have been expended wisely.

II. By showing wise expenditures, good results, and an opening to farther usefulness, such a report may well serve directly and indirectly as an appeal for further financial support.

III. It should be an accounting of stewardship in regard to a certain number of the future citizens of the commonwealth, whose welfare has been entrusted entirely to the care of that organization. Surely the children who enter the doors of an institution are as well worth accounting for as the dollars which flow into its

treasury. What a commotion would ensue if the treasurer after acknowledging the receipt of various sums of money, made on the other side of the account simply the entry "expended." Yet no one protests when the only light thrown upon the disposition of the children for whom the institution exists, is the single word "discharged." Are not human lives of more value than many dollars? The community which has given these institutions the right to a corporate existence, certainly does not expect from them a more complete and accurate account of a merely incidental feature than of the main object of their existence.

IV. A very important function of an annual report is to serve as a contribution to the science of child-saving. Each institution has its own line of experience, has worked out the details of its own experiment, and should make this knowledge the common property of all. The item of information which it can contribute may be of vital importance in the formation and spread of right views and wise methods in child-caring work. It is a very encouraging fact that colleges and universities are introducing these subjects as topics of instruction and investigation, but after all it is not in the university that the real thing is studied and discoveries made. The colleges can do much to put in order and disseminate the discoveries of others, and still more in directing a supply of well trained minds to philanthropic work, but professors and students, as well as those who have general oversight over large numbers and many sorts of charities, must look largely to the writers of reports for their information. It remains for these to decide whether our science of child-saving shall be a true science or a sham. "All social studies must rest upon actual experience. We must deal with concrete realities." (Prof. Henderson.) The concrete realities in this social study are to be found in thousands of scattered homes in which these agencies have placed children, in the lives of tens of thousands of children who have lived in such institutions, in the events, or lack of events, that fill in each year 365 days of 24 hours each in the hundreds of child-caring institutions, in the daily experiences of those who are employed in such work, and in the lives of parents whose children have been thus reared. All this is far

beyond our immediate reach. We must get what we know of it largely from the secretaries and superintendents who write reports, and are supposed to present there an epitome of the facts concerning their particular institutions. If they mislead us our social studies will give us a set of social quacks, not true physicians.

To serve these four purposes an annual report should be, first of all, an honest, clear, complete statement of just what has been done during the year, how it has been done, and why it has been done. It should leave no question of fact unanswered which would naturally suggest itself to the careful reader. If we are ever to accurately measure the field of child-dependency and test the adequacy of existing provisions, such statements are the first necessity. It must be said that in many cases reports fail to serve this purpose. They suggest rather than answer questions. Reports of child-saving agencies should be more easily prepared than those of most other charities since they deal with concrete specific facts, which can be added, subtracted and "proven." Too often, however, reports are painfully self-conscious efforts to say something new and striking, rather than simply the real thing, the thing that has been done. Such efforts to be interesting often surround the whole subject with a false sentimentality, hiding the real nature of the problem and creating many erroneous beliefs.

Being first a statement of facts, the report may be next a statement of opinion based on such facts. If the second feature may be sometimes omitted, the first certainly should never be. In general, however, the public are pleased to know what seems to have been learned in doing the things chronicled in the report and how that work seems to bear on other problems of social progress.

Having no desire to be merely critical, realizing how infinitely better the present efforts are than none at all, and having the highest regard for the praiseworthy motives of the writers, we may, perhaps, be pardoned a few farther observations on reports as they are found. The general plan is fairly uniform. One might express the general formula something like this:—

Lists of officers, managers and various sorts of members	.	.	.	.	4	pages.
Report of Board of Managers	.	.	.	.	2	"
Statistical report	.	.	.	.	1	"
Treasurer's report	.	.	.	.	1	"
List of contributors	.	.	.	.	4	"
List on donors of clothing, papers, etc.,	.	.	.	.	4	"

It might seem to an unthinking person that the most important feature of an institution for children, the feature for which all the others existed and without which they would be worse than ludicrous, would be the children themselves. It is not usual, however, to find much space devoted to the beneficiaries. After studying a number of these reports, if one were to yield to a morbid inclination to be cynical, he might, judging from the relative amount of space and prominence given the various features of the institution, rank them in importance as follows:—I. The Managers. II. The buildings. III. The grounds. IV. Contributors of money. V. Contributors of clothing, candy, etc. VI. The children.

Even when dealing with concrete facts, there are many instances of painful ambiguity. It is quite common to dismiss all children who have left the institution with the single word—discharged. In other cases after enumerating other and legitimate modes of disappearance such as “returned to relatives,” “placed in families,” etc., we are confronted by the mystifying phrase, “otherwise discharged.” Not being included in the methods enumerated, we wonder what this can imply. Did these children abscond? Or were they lost? Or did some dreadful and nameless fate befall them? “Transferred to other institutions” is another question-provoking phrase. *What* other institutions, and *why* transferred? “Sent out of the State” may be a legitimate method of disappearing from the charitable horizon, but one cannot but wonder why, where, to whom, and under whose supervision.

The treasurer's report is usually fairly satisfactory, except that the various headings are often artificial rather than natural divisions, and that amounts received from other institutions or public

authorities are not always clearly stated in *separate* items. With the publishing of page after page of names and addresses of people who have sent a few papers, or partly worn garments, or packages of candy, or spools of thread, perhaps no fault should be found, since it may secure other contributions. Still, as one reads it all, he cannot help feeling that there is as yet a very limited acceptance of the precept of a certain Teacher who said, "When thou doest alms let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth."

We should be an unprofitable servant indeed, if we allowed ourselves to express these sentiments of the work of those who, from the noblest of motives, have undertaken the highest of duties, if it were simply to call attention to the incidental deficiencies. It is easy to note shortcomings, but it is a fruitless and abominable task unless the way is pointed to something better. We will therefore try to call attention to those items of information, which, it seems to us should be included in the annual report of a child-caring organization in order to enable it to serve the purposes we have indicated, omitting such features as are already generally included. Answers to the following questions would go far certainly toward making every report an effective appeal if money were needed, and a document of permanent and scientific value.

I. Admissions. What were the ages and parental relations of the children admitted during the past year? What principles govern the selection of candidates for admission? What means are taken to ascertain the facts upon which the decisions are based? How much inquiry is made in regard to the family history? In how many cases were the parents morally unfit to care for the children, and in how many simply financially unable? How many worthy cases were refused admittance through lack of room or means? About what proportion of cases applying for admission were deemed worthy? What seemed to be the causes, direct and indirect, which made it necessary that these children should be cared for by charity? Does there seem to be any noticeable increase in the number of applications for admission, and can any connection be traced between this demand and social or economic changes that may have taken place? Is the present provision for friendless

children ample, or are some children still unprovided for, and if so, what becomes of such? Does your experience indicate the need of some sorts of relief for children which an asylum cannot give? Does it indicate any needed change in legislation concerning children?

II. The Life in the Institution. What elements enter into the daily life of the children? Do they attend the public school, and if not, what branches are taught in the institution, and during what hours are the children in school? How much time is given to work and in what lines? What is there of industrial training? How much of the day is devoted to play, and what sorts of amusements are provided and encouraged? How nearly do the conditions of sleeping and eating approximate real family life? What do the children do in the interval between supper and bedtime? How much is there of contact with adult life of high character? *Whose* children do they feel themselves to be? What changes, if any, are noticed in the physical, mental, and moral habits of the children as they remain in the institution?

III. Discharge. What were the ages and the duration of institutional life of the children discharged during the past year? What considerations determine when a child shall leave the institution? What are the rules relating thereto, and why are they as they are? How many of the children discharged were returned to their parents? In what proportion of these cases were the children able to be self-supporting? What means are taken to ascertain whether the parents of children in the institution have become able to contribute to their support, and to compel them to do so, or to resume the charge of their children? When children are returned to their parents at a self-supporting age, is any farther supervision exercised over them, any interest taken in their welfare, or any record kept of their whereabouts? How many were returned to relatives, other than parents? What were the degrees of relationship, the ages of these children and their earning capacity?

How many of the children were placed in families other than parents or relatives? In detail, just what means were taken to

make sure that these families were worthy people, and what are the standards of "worthy" in this connection? Of the applications for children received during the year, how many were, upon investigation, approved? What was the *ratio between available, approved applications, and children to be placed-out?* In general, what sorts of people, as regards occupation, wealth and character, apply for children, and for what reasons? Does the number of approved applications seem fairly constant from year to year? Dividing the children who should be placed out into four classes, boys and girls, over eight years of age and under eight years, what is the ratio of available applications for each class to the number of that class? What were the ages of children placed in families during the year, and how many were legally adopted? Of those placed in families during the past and preceding years, how many have been re-located, and how many times?

IV. Supervision of Placed-out Children. How many children placed-out in families are now under the supervision of the institution? (It is an amazing fact that few institutions or placing-out agencies seem to be able to give a definite answer to this question.) How many visits were made to children during the year, by whom, and were any children not visited? How many reports were received from school-teachers and pastors?

Upon what sort of contract are children placed in families? How many months' attendance at school are required and how do you ascertain the actual attendance? At what age do the boys begin to receive wages; the girls? Were any cases of neglect or cruelty discovered during the year? Until what age do you exercise supervision? What are your opinions as to the comparative merits and possibilities of the asylum and family systems? How many children were discharged in other ways, why, to whom, and upon what terms?

V. Children Remaining in the Institution. How many of them are there, because:—1, parents may reclaim them; 2, suitable homes in families have not offered; 3, mental or physical disability prevents placing-out; 4, the managers or officers believe that the institution is the best place for these particular children at this

particular time? Toward the support of how many do parents contribute, and at what rate?

VI. General Results. What sort of citizens do the graduates of child-caring institutions become? An adequate answer to this question is rapidly becoming a pressing necessity. The challenge has been thrown down more than once that such children "turn out badly." Father Huntington in his Plymouth lecture on "Philanthropy and Morality," boldly states his belief that a majority of these children find their way to the poorhouse or the penitentiary. This statement will not be generally accepted, but as a result of such remarks, the public will soon insist upon knowing what quality of life the asylum and placing-out system produce. *This is the real and only test of their efficiency.* The public will not much longer be satisfied with citation of isolated instances of unusual success. It will ask:—What of the Ninety and Nine? Equally unsatisfactory are such vague statements as the following:—"The results as shown by the records are upwards of eighty per cent reformed." To give the true answer is merely a matter of careful records, adequate supervision and rugged honesty. The public, including the contributing public, will soon insist on knowing just how many of the boys become self-supporting citizens, reasonably temperate and honest, having a steady abiding place and regular employment, and how many of the girls become wedded mothers and how many unwedded. It will also wish to know how many of these citizens remain in the rural population, how many drift back to the city, how many return to the city with a worthy purpose, and in what occupations they are to be found. In applying this the final test of the efficiency of the work of the child-caring organizations, the children should be divided into three classes:—first, those adopted in infancy, in which case we note the result simply of a change of environment; second, children placed out at a self-supporting age, in which cases we may observe the effect of institutional training plus a change of environment; third those returned to parents when self-supporting, where we note the effect of a return to the old environment after a period of institutional training.



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